

Getting Translations

May 1998

Below are a few pointers that may help you provide the best possible translations for members of your community. We won't promise that this process will be fast and easy. As you handle getting a few translations done, you will recognize that spending time in the beginning to do them well will save a lot of time and embarrassment later from doing them hastily or as an afterthought.

Health education materials, whenever possible, should be developed directly for the language and dialect of the intended audience. The usual practice is to develop materials in English first and then translate them. However, this frequently doesn't work because of differences in cultures and languages. Literal translations of English can be meaningless or even offensive. Slogans, catchy phrases and idioms usually don't carry the same impact in another language.

1 Research the audience

Before you translate anything, make sure there is an identified need, a realistic goal, a target audience, a way to test it and an effective means to disseminate it. Know your audience and how to reach them. Don't assume that written materials will be the best answer.

2 Get advice from the community

Cultural values, concepts and beliefs play a large role in people's health practices. Identify key people in the target community who can advise you on how to reach your audience and how to word the message. These advisors may also be able to check the accuracy of the translation and suggest ways to improve it.

Translating materials into a host of different languages can be costly, time consuming and frustrating. You want the information to be helpful and accurate, but unless you are fluent in the language and familiar with the culture, you won't know if it has been translated properly.

3 Use a translation service

Professional translation services provide a good starting place because they are quick and reliable. They employ qualified translators and usually cross-check their work for accuracy and appropriateness. However, they may not use the dialect or vernacular of your audience. Have your community advisors check the work of a translation service.

Once you have a draft of the piece ready, get cost estimates. Fax the words in English along with a rough layout to the translation service. Then call them and communicate fully what you need:

- Explain who the audience is
- Specify a reading level
- Request “dynamic equivalence”—the same meaning, not just the same words
- Get recommendations on the cultural appropriateness of terms, examples and illustrations
- Request a thorough check of spelling and grammar
- Have them provide camera-ready art to your specifications
- Agree on a delivery date
- Let them know what process you will use for checking accuracy and completing corrections and revisions.

Turnaround times, services and prices vary. Work closely with the contact person at the translation service so that the final product is exactly what you want.

4 Pre-test before printing

As with all educational materials, we recommend pre-testing to determine if the piece is understandable, relevant, attractive, credible and acceptable to the audience. Consider hiring an interpreter from the community as a way of reviewing or pre-testing the final translation. Involve your community advisors.

5 Back translate as a final check

We recommend doing “back translations” to check accuracy before printing. Identify a bilingual person to translate the finished piece back into English. This will tell you if the message is right. Be prepared to pay for this service. Your community advisors may also be able to play a role in back translating.

DOH Translation Brokerage

The Washington State Department of Health, Office of Health Promotion initiated a Translation Brokerage in 1997. The aim was to assure that DOH educational materials are high quality, consistent and appropriate in various languages. Seven translation services fulfilled the screening requirements for a 2-year contract. The brokerage contract is for DOH programs only. However, any local health agency may use these private businesses on their own.

Below is a list of the certified translation services for 1997-98. We offer them as a starting point for getting your work translated. If you have recommendations for other translation services, please let us know. We rebid the brokerage contract every two years and are open to qualifying other companies.

Andalex, Inc.
510 SW Third Ave. Suite 400
Portland, OR 97204
503-241-9756

Dynamic Language Center, Ltd.
5200 Southcenter Blvd. Suite 25
Seattle, WA 98188
206-244-6709

Corporate Translation Services, Inc.
11800 NE 95th #260
Vancouver, WA 98682
360-693-9292

The Language Connection
14525 160th Ave. SE
Renton, WA 98059
425-277-9045

Cross Cultural Communications, Inc.
515 South M St.
Tacoma, WA 98405
253-272-8524

Refugee and Immigrant Forum of
Snohomish County
801 Wetmore Ave.
Everett, WA 98201
425-388-9129

Documents International
2701 First Ave. Suite 200
Seattle, WA 98121-1123
206-441-7551

Each of these vendors submitted information on rates, normal turn-around, additional services and quality assurance methods. Each is certified to provide translations in Spanish, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Chinese, Korean and Russian.

For more information call them directly or contact:

